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SPY CHIEFS DESCRIBE DANGER IN REPORTING SECRETS OBTAINED BY SOVIETS
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The nation's intelligence chiefs are trying to prevent news reporting of some secrets already obtained by the Soviet Union, because it might corroborate data from spies the Soviets mistrusted and also tip off less sophisticated adversaries.

And they worry that if they confirm seemingly harmless intelligence secrets, known to many reporters and scholars as well as the Soviets, they will over time unwittingly provide enough small items so a foreign spy can discover or infer a larger, truly damaging secret.

These points were made this past week by chiefs of the CIA and the National Security Agency in an interview with The Associated Press and by a federal prosecutor in Baltimore where former NSA communications expert Ronald W. Pelton is on trial for selling the Soviets his knowledge of how the United States monitors their communications.

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Their explanations followed days of jawboning and threats of criminal prosecution directed by CIA Director William J. Casey and NSA Director Lt. Gen. William E. Odom at news organizations in an effort to prevent publication or broadcast of stories describing the secrets Pelton is charged with betraying.

In the interview, Deputy CIA Director Robert M. Gates said, "The line we hear most is: 'You guys are just trying to keep from Americans what the Russians already know.' How does any member of the press know what the Russians know? Does anyone in the media have any penetrations of the KGB?

"People in the press don't know the degree to which the information they provide amplifies on what a spy may have given, confirms what a spy may have given or updates what a spy has given," Gates added.

"Whether you're a Soviet or an American intelligence officer, you often won't take at face value what you hear from a single source, and so when you see it confirmed what a single agent has reported, it obviously has added confidence to what you have learned."At the Baltimore trial, prosecutors introduced transcripts of telephone calls they said Pelton made to Vitaly Yurchenko, identified by the CIA as security chief at the Soviet Embassy here at that time. Yurchenko was the Soviet KGB officer who defected last year but returned to the Soviets three months later.

The prosecutors deleted lines they said could identify where wiretaps were placed. Yet, the transcripts revealed that Pelton called from two places outside the embassy, and they left no real doubt that the U.S. government wiretaps telephone lines into the Soviet compound, which has been reported in news stories and books in this country for years.

The prosecutors also showed the jury but sealed from the press and public a map on which they said Pelton marked for FBI agents the location he supplied to the Soviets of a U.S. listening device.

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The Washington Post quoted U.S. sources as saying the location is in the Sea of Okhotsk off Siberia. The Post sources added that U.S. submarines put the device there and that U.S. officials believe the Soviets have found it. Among many books and articles on this spy program, The New York Times reported in 1975 that U.S. submarines tapped undersea military cables off the Soviet coast.

The officials were asked why the location of the wiretaps and map could not be reported in view of evidence that the Soviets already have the data. They would not respond to the specific examples, but answered in general terms.

One of Casey's top aides, George Lauder, responded, "The Soviets aren't our only adversary, and we might want to use some of this very expensive equipment in areas where the targets have far less knowledge and fewer resources to counter it."In Baltimore, prosecutor John Douglass said some details were withheld because other unfriendly nations besides the Soviet Union "have a very keen interest in the same kind of information."In the interview, the NSA's Odom said: "If I respond to your arguments and say, 'Yes, this little fact by itself is harmless to publish,' and the next little fact is harmless to publish, somewhere down the road ... the accumulation adds up to a rather considerable body of new information which was not in our interest to have out."He said even U.S. intelligence experts could release "fact by fact the elements of a case and cross right through the line of where you greatly expand the area of information without ever having realized that. ... And when you talk to a source, you draw him across a line he didn't intend to go across."Despite their remarks, the U.S. government has regularly argued in Freedom of Information court cases that news stories based on sources are rumor and speculation and provide no confirmation of government secrets.

In light of this position, they were asked why they chose to point out certain stories in public for possible prosecution or warnings when their own actions might tend to confirm the stories.

"We have to balance out the risks," Odom replied.

Casey added, "Every time we talk to a media person we have that judgment to make. There's a certain confirmation we'd rather not make, but if the damage is severe and the prospect is that the story's going to come out, we take a shot at it. Sometimes, it's a very close call."Gates added that despite their public silence on some of these questions, the intelligence officials were willing to explain their decisions to the president and congressional oversight committees so "we are held accountable for those judgments."